

**Fatherhood and Incarceration
As Potential Turning Points in
the Criminal Careers of Unskilled Men**

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Abstract

This paper draws on data gleaned from in-depth, repeated inter-views with approximately 200 low-income noncustodial fathers in two U.S. cities. It focuses on two social problems that have seldom been brought together in the same analysis: father involvement (both economic and relational), and the impact of men's involvement with the criminal justice system. In our sample, roughly one-third of respondents report being incarcerated at least once during their life course. We look in detail at what these respondents have to say about how their involvement with the criminal justice system has affected their ability and willingness to maintain economic and relational involvement with their noncustodial children. We find that fathers believe incarceration has profound effects on their relationships, both with their children, their children's mothers, and others within their social network (their own mothers, for example) who may maintain some contact with the child. In addition, we look at the accounts of men who have not been incarcerated, the vast majority of whom have been involved in criminal activity at some point in their lifetime. We gathered detailed job histories for each of these men, including both legal and illegal employment. We find that once men become fathers and choose to activate the father role with one or more of their children, their hierarchy of job preferences changes dramatically. We argue that children are among the most valued resources these fathers have, and that if they chose to activate the fathering role, the desire to remain involved in that child's life often changes their career trajectory, bringing them back into the formal economy, albeit at very low-level jobs.

Over the last three decades, three trends have profoundly affected the lives of unskilled and semiskilled men. First, wages for low-skilled men employed full-time and full-year have declined sharply as has the proportion of those who do work full-time, full-year. The drop has been substantial for African Americans and Latinos, but especially dramatic for unskilled whites (Bound and Johnson 1992; Katz and Murphy 1992; Lerman 1993). Second, rates of marriage for low-income and minority men have diminished dramatically and thus the proportion of these men with noncustodial children has risen (Tucker and Mitchell-Kernan 1995). Third, incarceration rates have also increased, especially for low-income and minority men (Federal Bureau of Investigation 1992; 1990).¹

What does the confluence of these trends mean in the lives of unskilled and semiskilled men? There is substantial evidence that criminal involvement increases when men are unemployed (Farrington et al. 1986), when their wages are low (Doyle, Ahmed, and Horn 1999; Grogger 1998), or when entry-level jobs are scarce (Shihadeah and Ousey 1998). Conversely, offenders tend to desist when they find stable employment and show commitment to the job (Shover 1996), especially if this transition occurs when they are older (Bachman and Schulenberg 1993; Hagan and McCarthy 1997; Uggen 2000). Attachment to the military has a similar effect, and timing also matters (after age 22, military service tends to disrupt adult bonds to family and work (Sampson and Laub 1996)). Young men also tend to turn from crime when they marry and maintain a stable marital relationship over time (Laub, Nagin, and Sampson 1998; Laub and Sampson 1993; Sampson and Laub 1993; 1990), though the relationship may also be sensitive to age in that a very young marriage can worsen offending behavior (Bachman and Schulenberg 1993). Sampson, Laub, and others explain these variations in criminal involvement (which persist after controlling for prior delinquent activity) by utilizing aspects of social control theory (Hirschi 1969) and the life course perspective (Elder 1974; 1985, Hagan and Palloni 1988).

¹ A fourth important trend is that the proportion of low-income fathers that are involved in the child support enforcement system has grown significantly, award amounts have increased, and child support enforcement policies have become increasingly punitive: many states now routinely garnish wages, seize tax returns, prosecute fathers who flee across state lines to evade a child support order, revoke driver's and professional licenses, and imprison men for nonpayment of child support (Garfinkel, Meyer, and McLanahan 1998). We talk about child support imprisonment and its effects in a separate paper (Nelson and Edin, 2001).

Social Bonds and Criminal Behavior

Social control theory draws from Durkheim's work on anomie (1951), and posits that individuals engage in deviant behavior when their bonds to society are weak or disrupted. The life course perspective examines "pathways through the age differentiated life span," in which age manifests itself through "expectations and options that impinge on decision processes and the course of events that give shape to life stages, transitions, and turning points" (Elder 1985:17). "Turning points" are key events that occur at a particular stage in an individual's life course (see also Hogan, 1980) that may alter his or her trajectory—in this case a criminal one—by either increasing or decreasing "social bonds to adult institutions of informal social control" (Sampson and Laub 1990:625), and thus act as either a brake on, or a spur to, criminal involvement. The life course perspective recognizes that individuals differ in their adaptations to similar life events, and that these responses can lead to different pathways (Elder 1985:35). The change can lead an offender to desist completely, offend at a lower level, or trade one kind of offense for another (Laub and Sampson 1993).

Turning points may steer a young man away from a criminal path and toward a more normative trajectory (Elder 1985; Warr 1998). However, these need not be unidirectional. In a qualitative re-analysis of data collected on a sample of delinquent and non-delinquent white teenaged males born between 1924 and 1935 (Gluek and Gluek 1968; 1950), Laub and Sampson studied declines in job and marital stability and found that when these social bonds were disrupted, criminal and deviant behavior increased (1993:317). In a similar vein, Horney, Osgood, and Marshall consider whether within-person offending behavior is influenced by "local life circumstances that strengthen or weaken social bonds" (1995:655). They found that men committed more crime during the time periods when they were using drugs, and committed less crime during the time periods when they lived with a wife.

Goal of the Paper

Our goal in this paper is twofold. First, we wish to look at the effect that imprisonment and incarceration may have on very low-income noncustodial fathers' ability to form and maintain social bonds with their children. In this first part of the analysis, we limit our focus on

those men in our sample who have been imprisoned or incarcerated since becoming fathers and analyze their life history narratives to identify the role that incarceration may play in either weakening these bonds or strengthening them. If social bonds are important predictors of within-person variations in criminal activity over time—and if we can demonstrate that the father-child bond is salient for fathers in this group—it is crucial that policymakers understand whether incarceration policies inadvertently increase criminal behavior by affecting father's ties to their children. On the other hand, we must give equal consideration to the possibility that for some fathers, especially those with particularly high offending rates, incarceration may play a restorative role, allowing bonds that were largely latent to begin to form or re-form.

Second, we look at all men in our sample who report any criminal activity in their past (including those with no imprisonment or incarceration history), and look for any evidence that becoming a father has functioned as a turning point in their criminal trajectories. We do not limit our analysis to a father's first birth, since we find that it is often a higher order birth that fathers report as most salient (perhaps because he is older and at a more receptive stage in his life). In particular, we want to examine whether the event of fatherhood, when combined with fear of being locked up, acts as a deterrent to future criminal activity.

The offending and desistance literature routinely considers men's ties to the institutions of the workplace, school, marriage, as well as their residential mobility or immigration, and even exogenous or "chance" events such as being drafted in wartime or being part of a cohort with unique access to a social good like the GI bill. Given this theoretical perspective, we were startled that we couldn't find a single study that considered the experience of paternity as a potential turning point, despite Sampson and Laub's acknowledgement that "in later adulthood, the dominant institutions are work, marriage, parenthood, and investment in community (1990:611)."² This was particularly surprising since many of these studies emphasize not the origins or onset of criminal behavior, but desistance from it (see also Uggen and Piliavin 1998). Our approach in this paper is entirely consistent with the social control/life course perspective advanced by Sampson and Laub; its distinctiveness is the emphasis on fatherhood as a potential source of adult bonding.

² There are, however, a few excellent studies of incarcerated fathers' bonds with their children, both within prison (Hairston 1998) and after release (Nurse 2000).

New data drawn from the Fragile Families Study of Child Well-being show that unmarried fathers very often have romantic relationships with the women who bear their noncustodial children, and sometimes say they plan to marry their child's mother. However, an even greater proportion say they intend to stay involved in their children's lives no matter what happens between themselves and their children's mothers. The fact that more than eight in ten unmarried fathers actually attend the birth of their child and/or visit the child and mother while they are still in the hospital attests to the importance these men place on their bonds with children (McLanahan et al. forthcoming). For men such as these, who seldom marry or find stable employment until they are well into their 30s (if at all), paternity is sometimes the only available event that has the potential to act as a turning point regarding their social attachments.

The Contribution of Qualitative Data

We are aware that existing data can and have been used to analyze relationships between some of factors outlined above. However, these data have some serious limitations and our data some distinctive advantages. Most importantly, non-custodial fathers are seriously underrepresented in large data sets, and the problem for low-income, never-married, and minority fathers is particularly acute (Garfinkel, McLanahan and Holden, 1998). According to estimates made by Garfinkel and his colleagues, it is fair to say that with the exception of the Fragile Families Study (which surveys only new fathers), for *low-income and minority noncustodial fathers*, the underrepresentation problem in most large surveys is so severe that it constitutes something of a crisis. Though we do have indirect data on these men, drawn from the reports of the women that bear their children and the heads of the households they reside in, we know very little about these fathers' own perspectives. We've been able to interview a large number of such men and have enjoyed a very high degree of rapport with them in the interviewing process.

In addition, qualitative data such as these can make several unique contributions to the body of research on low-skilled men. First, though the hallmark of quantitative analysis is measuring relationships between variables, the limitations of the data often mean that the processes or mechanisms leading to the outcome of interest remains opaque. Qualitative analysis can help to shed light on the processes and mechanisms by which one set of factors leads to another, such as how the event of fatherhood might act as a turning point in some cases but not in

others. Second, qualitative data can help to reveal actors' motivations for a given course of action. While we do not always take these accounts at face value, when properly analyzed the data can help to inform theories that make assumptions about such motivations. Third, qualitative methods allow subjects to respond to questions in open-ended narrative form rather than a fixed-choice manner. The resulting accounts can help to identify important correlates to outcomes of interest that might not otherwise have been considered. Fourth, qualitative interviewers often develop a high degree of rapport with their research subjects and are thus sometimes better able to get accurate measures of sensitive issues (i.e. criminal activity or family violence).

Research Method

The data are drawn from verbatim transcripts of repeated, in-depth interviews of roughly 300 unskilled and semiskilled low-income non-custodial fathers living in two U.S. cities (Philadelphia, PA, and Charleston, SC) conducted between September 1995 and May 2001. In each city, our sample is evenly divided by race/ethnicity and includes equal numbers of younger (age thirty and under) and older men (over thirty). The cities were chosen to reflect variation in economic conditions and policy contexts. Philadelphia City and its inner suburb, Camden New Jersey, both had slack labor markets during the study period, but the Charleston area's was one of the tightest in the nation. Both sites have strict child support enforcement systems, but Charleston's is especially punitive. The law enforcement regimes of these locales vary as well, though we have not explored these variations in depth. Generally, the primary limitation of qualitative data is that the sample size is small or equivalent data are not collected across all cases. This data set is unique in that we conducted a large number of interviews in a highly systematic manner. Over a third of respondents report imprisonment or incarceration (jail, prison, or time served in an alternative institution such as a rehabilitation program or halfway house). Roughly two thirds report at least one episode of criminal involvement over their lifetime. This paper, written before all of the data are fully transcribed and coded, represents only a portion of these cases (thus far, we've analyzed 45 cases with incarceration histories and an additional 45 cases with episodes of criminal involvement but no incarceration history). An additional advantage is that the transcripts contain a good deal of quantitative data (their average

monthly income from all sources and their expenditures) as well as rich qualitative information. Though we don't make full use of these data here, we intend to do so in a subsequent iteration of this paper.

According to our sampling strategy, all of our respondents have incomes of less than \$8 per hour or \$16,000 per year from formal sector employment, and none have a college degree. All have at least one child for whom they are the noncustodial father, most are not married and have never been married, nearly two thirds are African American or Latino, and roughly half report that they use drugs or consume alcohol at levels considered excessive. Furthermore, the majority live in economically disadvantaged urban neighborhoods. Considering the fact that these interviews took place in a period of unprecedented economic growth, our wage restriction alone means that the men in our sample are very disadvantaged indeed. The fathers in our sample come into contact with the criminal justice system primarily through the drug trade (other common crimes include theft, auto theft, burglary, robbery, and assault, and these are often drug related). Drugs play a very large role in the story we tell below; though not all of the incarceration or imprisonment we observe results from drug involvement, most is at least peripherally related to the use or sale of controlled substances.

This is a new area of interest to the investigators. Our father interviews contain detailed relational histories (both with their children's mothers and their children) employment histories (including formal, informal, and criminal employment), a recounting of experiences with the criminal justice system, detailed information on income (from *all* sources, including informal work and crime) and expenditures. Thus these data are potentially useful for understanding the pathways by which involvement with the criminal justice system may affect father's bond with their children *and* if familial relationships between fathers and children may affect criminal trajectories.

In this research we have used a focused life history approach that is common to ethnographic studies. Such an approach does have a serious limitation in that it involves retrospective accounts of events that may have happened months, or even years ago. However, quantitative longitudinal studies of criminal trajectories are rare, and qualitative longitudinal studies are even rarer (for exceptions, see McLeod, 1995 and Sullivan, 1989). The special advantage of the focused life history approach to ethnographic interviewing is that it offers the chance for the respondent to give a detailed narrative about important turning points in his life,

including his history of criminal offending, his interaction with the criminal justice system, and his formation and maintenance of social bonds.³

Findings

In this section, we pursue three lines of argument. First, we argue that offenders who have maintained contact with their children (or their children's mother) prior to arrest, the event of incarceration has a pronounced negative effect on their bond to both the mother and the child. Social control theorists would expect these men to continue their criminal careers after release because of these diminished attachments. Second, we show that for offenders whose lifestyle had created a wedge between himself and his family prior to arrest (usually because of severe drug or alcohol addiction), incarceration can be a turning point: an opportunity to take time out and reorient one's life. In some cases, fathers in this group use the experience of incarceration to rebuild severed ties with children (though often their romantic tie to the child's mother is not salvageable, a cooperative friendship can emerge). From the social control perspective, incarceration may have a rehabilitative effect for those men in this group who take advantage of this opportunity to re-attach themselves to family. Third, we broaden our analysis to include fathers with a history of criminal involvement but who have never been incarcerated. The event of fatherhood can sharply alter how men perceive the risks and rewards of criminal activity, particularly because they believe strongly that street crime leads to either victimization (death or debilitation) or eventual incarceration. For those men who choose to activate the fathering role (whether with a first or subsequent birth), this belief is likely to make the risks of crime far less tenable. Additionally, the men we interviewed tend to value the ties to their children above all other social bonds that could potentially link them to institutions of informal social control. As a result, fatherhood in and of it self can prove a powerful turning point that leads men away from crime and toward a more mainstream trajectory.

³ Laub and Sampson advocate a "person-centered" approach to research on criminal careers (Magnusson and Bergman 1988; 1990), which focuses on "persons" rather than "variables" and examines the life histories of persons over time.

Severing Fragile Ties

The standard perception among scholars is that incarceration has negative effects upon the father-child bond. This makes sense, in that jail time necessarily removes the father from his children's lives, both in terms of physical proximity and in terms of economic contributions. Fathers in our sample who fell into the "severed ties" group had several characteristics in common.

First, the vast majority offended either infrequently or moderately. Second, most had combined their criminal activity with some sort of episodic employment that, while not always formal sector work, was not illegal in and of itself (i.e. "under-the-table" employment). Third, these men generally did not report heavy drug or alcohol use prior to an episode of incarceration. Perhaps for these reasons men in this group all had established some sort of bond with at least one of their children that involved a pattern of regular visitation and/or financial support. In some cases, the bond extended to the child's mother, and in other cases it did not.

For these fathers, the event of incarceration proved devastating to their ties with their children and children's mothers. Virtually none of the fathers reported that their baby's mother "stayed" with them through the period of incarceration; in virtually every case, the mother broke up with them and/or became involved in a relationship with another man. Since mothers are generally the conduit through which fathers' communications with children must flow, the severing of the romantic relationship with the child's mother nearly always posed problems for fathers who wanted to remain connected to their children.

Second, fathers in this group sometimes claimed that their children's mothers used the fact of incarceration as a justification for prohibiting the father from any subsequent contact with his child, or that the mother used the fact of the father's prison record to "talk trash" about the father to the child, thus lessening the child's motivation to remain strongly bonded to the father. Several fathers in this group, for example, found upon release that their children and their children's mothers had moved away or had simply disappeared.

Third, even when mothers attempted to preserve the father-child tie during the period of incarceration, the mere fact of incarceration often means that fathers miss out on those key events that serve to build parental bonds and to signal to the community that they intend to support their children both emotionally and financially. These key events are such things as attending the child's birth or observing developmental milestones such as walking and talking.

We argue that the father's absence at these crucial moments can weaken his commitment to the child and, years later, their child's own sense of commitment to their father.

The harmful effects of incarceration can be seen in the case of Mark, a 32-year-old African American in Philadelphia who works under the table as a sandwich maker at a convenience store/delicatessen. Mark has an eleven-year-old daughter whom he sees several times a month and contributes to intermittently. Mark is one of five children and grew up with his mother and grandmother. His father left the family when he was quite young, and he hasn't seen him since he was 17 years old.

After graduating from high school, he went to work as a janitor, and at this time met his daughter's mother, who was still a high school senior. They were together two years when his daughter was born. When she was five years old, he was arrested for selling drugs.

It was a situation because why I started selling was because of my daughter. That is an excuse, true, but my daughter didn't have nothing for that Christmas, [] and it sent something inside [of me] and it just totally blew my mind. And I knew friends and family that was [selling drugs] and I always could have got into it but I didn't want to [before]. [] This was Christmas and it was like I couldn't get nothing [for her]. And to a dad, I don't care if he is doing drugs or anything, if a dad is out there and he love his child and he love his kids and if he can't get them stuff for that special occasion, it sends something through them.

Mark's plan was to sell drugs for just a short period of time, make a lot of money (he claimed made about \$700 a day when he sold drugs full time), and then move back into the legitimate workforce. He thought that his risk of imprisonment was minimal because he had never been convicted of any crime before. "You know what? I thought I could out-slick the system. I said, 'This is my first time. I never did anything [before]. [If I get caught], I am [only] going to get probation and I could walk off that.' [But] it didn't happen that way." Instead, he was arrested only three weeks after he began dealing and was sentenced to one year in prison. "[I was sent to a] prison where it is murderers and rapists and people not coming home for three hundred years, and it totally sent me ballistic. I thought I was going to go crazy and I didn't think I was going to make it."

While he was locked up, his girlfriend started seeing another man and he found out about it through the prison grapevine. Though they got back together when he returned from prison, she was still "creeping" on him and he decided to move back in with his mother. She then

married the man she was seeing (who had a good job as a bus driver), and she and her husband have recently had a son together. He feels that his time in prison is to blame for driving a wedge between himself and his daughter's mother.

If I wouldn't have got locked up, I would have still been with her, in the sense that it would have never happened—she would have never met no one else. [But] I can't say that the blame was hers; I can't say that the blame was my daughter's. The blame was [on] me and myself. I put myself in that situation and [now] it is up to me to think with a clear head and take it on another level.

Martinis is a 40-year-old African American father currently serving a sentence for parole violation in a halfway house in Philadelphia. He has a two-year-old son by his current girlfriend, and two teenaged children from a previous relationship. Although his 18-year-old son is more forgiving of his father's lapses, his 17-year-old daughter had become bitter over his going back and forth to prison when she was growing up. Just before we interviewed him, Martinis had made some effort to restore his relationship with his daughter, but he realized that he had a lot of history to overcome.

In the beginning we were [close]—all the way up until the age of eight or nine were we close. But after me keep getting myself in trouble [going back and forth to prison] I guess she kind of gave up on me. I was never around and I guess it hurt her. We just recently had a conversation on the phone and I had to explain to her where I was. Not just where I was literally, but my mindset and why I made the decisions I made, and why I was incarcerated and why I did certain things. It wasn't like I wanted to be away from her. I told her that I loved her dearly and we had a little rapport. ...Actually we [hadn't been] speaking to each other. My kids' mother said, "You are the adult. Go down there and talk to her and get y'all thing together so that y'all can have some kind of rapport." ...I had to go ahead and do that, and we talked, and she cried and she explained why she feel the way she feel. She feel that she didn't have no dad and it hurt me to hear that, but it was the truth. I don't blame her in a way because I wasn't there. So now I have been trying to incorporate myself into her life again and in her daughter's life. She is coming around now; she is coming to accept me more. But I don't think she is putting her all in it, because she maybe feels as though she don't know if I am going to disappear again. I used to promise her this and promise her that, and sometimes I didn't come through. I am not a bad dad—they tell me that they love me and everything, but it is just that I am not always there for them when they really need me around.

His latest incarceration is already affecting his relationship to his youngest son, something that disturbs him:

I am not there all the time where as though I want to be and it hurts me and it upsets me. [] I can remember that my dad was never around and I was wondering what it was like to always have your dad around. So I always tell myself that I would want to be around for them and sometimes I found myself doing [to them what happened to me], by me being incarcerated and not there in the years when they were growing up and their little personality starting to develop. [] I know that it upsets the mother . . . she wants me to be part of his life. [My son's mother] calls me now and she says, 'Marty, Rahmere doesn't really even know you....' I missed all that time with Rahmere when he was an infant. He was born May of last year and he didn't know who I was. And she was like, "That is your dad." She came twice [to visit me].... But she didn't bring him. I was very disappointed.... I seen him through pictures but I didn't really get a chance to see him personally until I came home in May [of this year].

Martinis' daughter was eight and his son was nine when he was first incarcerated for burglary. He thus had some time to establish a close relationship with them before he went to prison. He worries he has lost that opportunity with his younger son.

Donald, a 30-year-old African American in Charleston, has two children, a teenage daughter and a younger son of six. Donald says that his son doesn't like him very much because he was born when Donald was locked up—they did not meet until his son was three years old. His daughter is more forgiving because she had formed an attachment to him before he was incarcerated. She currently spends summers with Donald and he is negotiating an arrangement with her mother that would allow the daughter to live with him full-time.

Because men tend to become first-time fathers in their late teens and early twenties, at the very same time that they are most likely to be engaged in criminal activity and are at highest risk of incarceration, many of our respondents with incarceration histories report being incarcerated for the first several years of at least one of their children's lives. As we showed, earlier, The Fragile Families and Child Well-Being Study finds that over 80 percent of the fathers responsible for these births attend the birth or visit the mother and child in the hospital immediately thereafter. Our data reveal that a father's presence at his child's birth is a key event that signals to the larger community (the father's kin, the mother's kin, and peers) his intention to take some financial responsibility and, more importantly, to forge a solid emotional bond with that child. Non-custodial fathers who have been present for their children's birth often describe it as one of the most significant events of their lives. On a practical level, many states allow voluntary

admissions of paternity in-hospital, and missing this opportunity to form a legal bond to the child means that the father's name is often not on the child's birth certificate and that the mother, the state, or the father can only formalize that tie through more difficult and costly means later on. Fathers who are incarcerated when their child is born miss this crucial opportunity, and we speculate this may have consequences for his financial and emotional investments in the child.

Sometimes the co-occurrence of childbirth and incarceration plants seeds of doubt as to the child's true paternity. Julio is a 36-year-old father living in Charleston, South Carolina. His daughter was born exactly nine months after he was incarcerated, which led him to doubt whether she was really his child or not. Julio says this doubt "haunts" him, yet he's hesitant to have a blood test, because in his view, the child is already bonded to him and he is afraid of hurting her.

Donald recounts a similar situation with his son:

I found out [my son's mother] was pregnant when I was incarcerated...and a guy came in that I knew from school, and he said he'd seen Yvette and that she was pregnant. And I was like, "Whatever," you know, I was like, "By who?" So I ended up getting in touch with her and called her mom's house collect and...she was like, "Yeah, I pregnant, I'm pregnant from you." ...I was like, "Whatever, not me." I was like, "Come on, we dated off and on from seventh grade up until high school and you know we messed around and...you never got pregnant [all that time] from me." And she was like "Yeah, it's from you and what do you want to do?" and I was like, "I'm not doing nothing. I'm going to be sitting in here for while. I'm locked up." And one night, I was sitting in the cell after a few month and I was like [praying], "God, if its my child, show me it's my child, and just let me know something."

The next day his mother visited him in prison, something she had never done before, and reported that the child had been born. As both events happened only a day after he had prayed, he took them as a "sign" yet told us he had nagging doubts.

Both Donald and Julio were incarcerated for a period of several years. Yet our data show that even quite short periods of incarceration can mean that fathers of very young children regret that they miss out on milestones in their child's development. Rick, a young African American father living in Camden, spent just three months in jail when his son turning a year old. He was quite upset that the time away from his family caused him to miss out on the transition from infant to toddler:

‘Cause that was last August and my son had just, you know, [I went to jail before he] had...started walking and talking. And when I went [to jail] they barely let me see him. And when I got out, he was walking and talking. I was like, “Damn.” That crushed me. ‘Cause, you know, I wanted to see all that, you know. My first son.

Although incarcerated fathers must be separated from their children, one may wonder about the role of visitation in keeping fathers and children connected.⁴ Although our interviews did not address this question directly, our fathers who had served time seldom reported receiving visits from their children, or even their children’s mothers, while they were in jail or in prison. For a few, this was largely because they were sent to prison at an institution that was too far away for someone with no access to a car to visit. However, several others told us that serving time was harder if one remained in contact with one’s friends and family on the outside. For this reason, they voluntarily cut themselves off from outside relations. Donald, who had been to prison several times, told us,

Normally when I’m locked up I don’t accept visits. I don’t write if I’m locked up and I don’t do any of that, because it makes your time hard, you know, worrying about what’s going on out there and thinking about what’s going on out there; it makes it hard. You focus on getting this time done and getting this over with.

Mark was one of the few fathers whose child visited him regularly. His daughter was five when he was sent away for one year. Initially, it was her visits that kept him going. Yet toward the end of his sentence, he couldn’t take the strain of constant reminders of home:

And the only thing that kept me going [when I was in prison] was my daughter.

Q: Did you get to see her?

My daughter came to see me every weekend, every weekend my daughter’s mom brought her to see me—every weekend, when I was in the state, when I was still here. And the last three months of my sentence, they sent me all the way up there by the Pocono’s. ...[It was too hard for her to] make it and I didn’t want her to make it. She tried a couple of times and I kept denying it, because the closer you get to [being released] the harder it got when you see people from home. And

⁴ The Bureau of Justice Statistics shows that in 1999, 1.5 children had a mother or father in prison. Though about 40 percent of imprisoned fathers reported weekly contact with children by phone, letter, or a visit, nearly 60 percent of incarcerated fathers reported never having seen their children since their admission to prison (Klug 2000).

what you want to do is try to tune them out. [But] I wrote everyday, and she wrote me everyday. Boy, you should see how many letters.

When fathers are incarcerated, they must rely on their children's mothers to be the conduit to their children, though sometimes a kin member (i.e. the father's mother) can also play that role. The father's children's mothers do this either actively by bringing children to visit in prison, or more passively by simply accepting collect phone calls or, more rarely, letters. Yet incarceration is an event that can sever not only a father's relationship to his children, but also to his children's mother.

Often, a father and his children's mother are still romantically attached when he is initially incarcerated. However, this is a vulnerable time for their relationship, and many men report that their girlfriends form new attachments while they are in prison. Mark, whom we wrote about above, was in prison for less than a year and was planning on getting back together with his daughter's mother when he was released. Yet while he was away, she met a man who drove a bus for the local transit system. When Mark came home and started working for McDonald's, she took him back but still maintained a clandestine relationship with the other man. When Mark found out about it, he broke off the relationship:

We was going to get back together: marriage and everything. But she wasn't totally honest. I had much love for her and she didn't know how much love I had for her. ...[I didn't really blame her, because] I probably would have [had another relationship] too [if she was serving time]. But she couldn't be person enough to tell me—she kept trying to creep around. ...I suspected it and at that time I had people coming to me [and telling me about it]. ...So I did find out and she still denied it and from that point there it was just like a thing, "I can't never trust you now." ...If I wouldn't have got locked up, I would have still been with her in the same sense that it would have never happened—she would have never met no-one else.

Tom, a 30-year-old white father from Philadelphia, had just been imprisoned for selling drugs when his oldest child (now eleven years old) was born. While in prison and unable to continue a relatively lucrative career selling drugs, he lost his house (bought with drug proceeds) and his girlfriend, who took up with someone else while he was incarcerated. After release, Tom went straight (stopped selling drugs). Yet, Tom's baby's mother wouldn't let him see his son unless he was paying regular child support—something he found hard to do because his prison

record locked him out of most conventional employment. At the time of the interview, Tom hadn't seen his son in five years.

When fathers are imprisoned, their children's mothers may use the fact that their baby's father has a prison record as an justification to completely cut him out of the child's life, even if they knew full well he was criminally involved prior to the incarceration. In low-income communities, particularly African American communities, mothers feel considerable pressure to keep their baby's father involved, especially since many of the mothers didn't have a father around themselves and sorely felt the lack. For women who want to continue dealing with a father who they view as a ne'er-do-well, incarceration provides a socially acceptable excuse to deny visitation or even to simply disappear. Ruben, a 20-year-old Puerto Rican living in Philadelphia, had his only child at the age of 16. When he was 19, he went to prison on a drug charge and served a one-year sentence. Upon his return to the neighborhood he and his baby's mother had lived in, he could find no trace of either. The mother did contact him to let him know that they were okay, but she refused to tell him where she was living or to let him see his son.

If the children's mother is addicted to drugs or otherwise deemed unfit (abusive or neglectful), a criminal record can make a judge unwilling to let the child's father have custody of the child. Thomas, a 28-year-old white Philadelphia father has a 9-year-old daughter and son by different mothers. Thomas was convicted of attempted murder when he was in his early twenties. Subsequently, his son's mother, a drug addict, lost custody of the children to the state. He describes what happened then:

[The state] took him, and put him in a foster home. After that happened, I had a court date the next week to see if I could get him. But something happened—I think it was because of my criminal record—they said no and they denied me. And my lawyer said only two things could happen. You have the choice of leaving that child in a foster home or you can sign the rights over to the [maternal] grandmother, just temporarily, [until you get yourself together and can convince the judge you can care for the child]. [] I didn't want him in no foster home so I signed.

When relationships between fathers and their children's mothers break down and become acrimonious, as they often do, men with criminal records may find themselves at a distinct disadvantage. Many fathers report that their former girlfriends use his record of criminal

behavior, or simply the fact that he has been in prison or is on parole as an excuse to “talk trash” about him to the children and to others. Bill, a 31-year-old white father in Philadelphia, claimed that his “ex-wife” (his term for her, though they were never legally married) kept calling his parole officer and “told lies” about him (claiming he had violated his parole in various ways) whenever she wanted something from him and he was hesitant to provide it. He felt powerless in this situation, especially since submitting to her wishes didn’t guarantee him access to his child.

Rebuilding Severed Ties

From the above cases, it is clear that incarceration can negatively affect fathers’ relationships to their children, either directly or indirectly, by severing their ties to their children’s mothers or maligning them in front of their children in such a way that they didn’t want contact with their fathers. However, it is important to keep in mind that for some fathers it is not the time in prison that first drives the wedge between them and their children, but rather their criminal behavior that lands them there in the first place.

For fathers that fell into the “Rebuilding Severed Ties” group, the bond between them, their children, and their children’s mothers had generally been destroyed prior to incarceration. In every case we observed, this was due to heavy use of either alcohol or illicit drugs. Substance abuse is extremely hard on family ties. First, fathers who engage in heavy substance use often remove themselves from contact with those they care about (even from their own kin) because they are ashamed to be seen so “down and out.”

Second, even fathers whose own shame doesn’t cause them to remove themselves often find that the child’s mother shuts them out. It’s not hard to imagine why mothers do this; drug addicts tend to steal, even from their own families, to feed their habit, they engage in dangerous behavior that can follow them from the streets into the household, they generally offend at very high rates in order to feed their habits, the debilitating nature of the addiction often makes it difficult for these fathers to combine their criminal activity with other more legitimate (and thus more socially acceptable) economic pursuits, and finally, they generally drink or smoke up all their “profits” from illicit work. None of these tendencies make them good father material in the eyes of their children’s mothers. In fact, having such fathers involved with their children can be downright dangerous. It is for these reasons that fathers in this group who begin an episode of

incarceration often feel they have nowhere to go but up in regard to their relationships with their children.

Of course, not all fathers who had severed their ties with their children prior to incarceration used the experience to reorient their lives. Our sample, like nationally representative sample, contains a few very serious offenders for whom nothing, not fatherhood, incarceration, or any other event, can deter them from a criminal trajectory (see the case of “O”, below).

We also find that older fathers are more likely to use the event of incarceration to try to repair severed bonds with family than younger fathers. While it is true that older fathers tend to have older children, making the reconnection potentially more difficult, the reader must keep in mind that each child a man fathers, from his first to his last, offers the potential for reconciliation, and these older fathers tend to concentrate their efforts on their youngest child (this is possible because the children often have different mothers).

In addition, we find some evidence in our interviews that fathers might be more motivated to reconnect when they’re somewhat older because they’ve learned that crime doesn’t pay and they plan on going straight anyway. What we mean here is that the accumulation of experiences with criminal offending tend to change fathers notions of how well crime, particularly the drug trade, pays in relation to more formal work. When such men transition to mainstream employment, they are generally taking jobs at the very lowest end of the local labor markets they find themselves in; as day laborers, factory workers, fast food workers, and the like. When they were younger, they were largely convinced by both street lore and their own early experiences that the drug trade paid better than these legitimate jobs. Over time, their own experience taught them that their profits fluctuated wildly, that their business constantly exposed them to long hours out of doors, and carried with it a substantial risk of death or imprisonment (this risk became palpable when they began to see more and more of their own street peers killed, disabled, or shot as a result of the trade). Even worse, they noted that since drug dealing often went hand in hand with drug addiction, over time their drug use escalated, and they drank or smoked up their profits leaving them nothing to show for their efforts. Thus, many had adopted the philosophy that “fast money don’t get you nowhere,” but that “slow money is sure money.” It is interesting that fathers who had made the decision to pursue “slow money” in “menial jobs” thought they might better be able to forge a reconnection with their children than if

they had continued to “live the life” and “get the paper.” Provided they could kick their addiction, the very fact that they expressed willingness to engage in menial yet steady employment, some said, was a powerful testimony to the fact that “daddy got himself together.”

Reuben is a 41-year-old Puerto Rican father from Philadelphia who has a four-year-old son. In his son’s infancy, Reuben was a heavy drug user. Reuben was arrested for burglary (to “feed” his habit) when the child was a few months old. After serving his sentence of three years, Reuben could not find his ex-girlfriend or his son. He told our interviewer, “I have not seen [my son] and I don’t [know where he is]—I know that I am his father, that is all that I know. ...He is mine, but I have not been able to be a father to him, [first because of my drug addiction and then because of prison].

In fact, for fathers whose criminal lifestyle and the drug and alcohol abuse that so often accompanies it has had them “rippin’ and runnin’ the streets” to such an extent that they’ve had virtually no relationship with their children prior to incarceration, time spent in jail or prison might actually provide the necessary “time out” they need to “reorient” their lives (decide to stop offending) and try to forge a pathway back into their children’s lives. To illustrate the turning point that the event of incarceration can be for such fathers, we present the case of Jimmy in some detail.

Jimmy is a 40-year-old African American father residing in Camden, New Jersey. Jimmy’s mother died young, and his older sister, who had six children of her own, raised him. He dropped out of high school to work full time because his sister didn’t earn enough to provide him with the kind of clothing and shoes he wanted. To take pressure off of her, and to satisfy his own tastes in clothing, he traded school for a job between 9th and 10th grade. Jimmy works as a landscaper, and has held landscaping jobs on and off for nearly two decades, in between stints in jail and prison. Most of his employers pay him under-the-table. Jimmy thinks he would own his own business right now if it weren’t for his ongoing drug addiction and his criminal record.

Jimmy children’s mother is a woman named Shirley, a fellow drug addict, with whom he’s had an on and off relationship. Just after his first child was born, Jimmy went to prison for the first time, for burglary (he has 34 burglaries on his record, all motivated by a need to feed his drug habit). When his children were 6 and 7, Jimmy was again imprisoned, and Shirley met and married another man, a fellow drug addict as well. When Shirley married a second time, her

drug habit escalated and after about a year of heavy using she lost custody of the children. Because he was in prison, Jimmy couldn't intervene. Currently, both children are in foster care. Jimmy occasionally sees his daughter, whom he's taking with him to church on Father's Day, but he hasn't seen his son since his release three years ago.

Jimmy describes his most recent incarceration (he served an additional 15 months because of a positive drug test while out on parole) as a "blessing in disguise." He "found God again" in prison and was able to "get himself together." He doesn't blame the loss of his relationship with his children's mother or his son on his repeated incarceration, because he says he was too busy using drugs and burglarizing factories to have much of a relationship with them anyway. Now, for the first time, (and thanks to a cooperative foster parent who is a fellow Christian) he has been able to forge a relationship with his daughter. He thinks she loves and respects him now because "daddy got himself together."

Jimmy's story shows that prison may function as a turning point and an opportunity to redirect one's life for those fathers whose lives have become so out of control (usually because of alcohol or drug addiction) that they need a powerful shock or a highly structured environment, like prison, to break their downward spiral. In Jimmy's case, his criminal lifestyle and the drug addiction that fueled it had already broken down his bond with his children. Serving his most recent sentence, and the rekindled religious fervor that resulted, helped him to break the cycle of burglary and drug use and to "keep clean" during the three years since his release. Thus, incarceration contributed both directly and indirectly to his rehabilitation as a father.

Jack, a white, 33-year-old father from Philadelphia, was convicted for five DUI's in a single month after the mother of his children left him. Like Jimmy, serving his time gave Jack the necessary perspective on life, and offered him an opportunity to renew a latent religious commitment. During his interview, Jack exclaimed,

Jail was the best thing that happened to me! I sat down on Christmas Eve in jail. Christmas Day in jail. I reflected on what I'd done. So I did a little soul-searching. I remember I was in maximum security. [] Every night my conscience would come to me and beat the hell out of me. I never – when I was at home watching TV, my conscience would kick in and I'd turn the channel. [] And this was the first time my conscience actually had me alone so it could work on me, which it did. About four or five nights, whack, whack. Like on the fourth night, I said, "Please, help me, God. I'm your son. I want to start again." And I felt forgiven. Well that happened just before the first of January. And I've been

praying to God ever since. I'm not born again or a Bible-thumper; I just got God back in my life.

Wilbert, a 38-year-old African American father tells a similar story. When Nelson interviewed him in 1998, he had just been free for two months after serving a six-month prison sentence for drug dealing. Before he was arrested, he was an alcoholic, drug addict and full-time drug dealer. In fact, he was so involved in drug trafficking that he used to

. . . stay out in the street all night long for weeks and change clothes right in the middle of the street. The water plugs would be on, and I would wash up in the water plug, get a bar of soap and change my clothes in the middle of the street, because I was out there on drugs, selling drugs around the block, going in and out of jail.

As Wilbert himself summed it up, "I pretty much didn't give a damn—[I was] running around and I didn't care about anything." While he was incarcerated, he asked the mothers of his 13-year-old son and 10-year-old daughter to bring them for a visit, but "they made up excuses: they don't have time, they have [other things to do]--you know how it is," probably because he hadn't seen either one of them for quite some time before his arrest.

After sitting in jail for five months while waiting to be sentenced, Wilbert got a chance to think about his life and how he wanted things to be different.

I went to prison a couple of times, but this last time really did something to me—it made me find myself. Maybe the first month or so when I was in there, I would say that I wanted a beer, or when I get out I am going to get this weed or this paper (drug money). But I didn't get out in a month, I didn't get out in three or four months. [] By then I was looking at the right thing to do. I was going to church in there. I was working in an upholstery shop, making something like a dollar something a day, but I learned a lot. It was vocational training, upholstery skills. I could always use it [later].

The story of Mark, on the other hand, is quite different from the prior accounts. Although we have no direct evidence from Mark's case, other fathers in our sample have told us that their children's mothers do not necessarily disapprove of selling drugs as a short-term financial strategy, as long as it stays short term. In fact, the start-up costs associated with having a baby, the crib, the stroller, and other relatively expensive one time purchases that a baby's birth

often requires, can sometimes motivate criminal involvement, and some men report that their girlfriends often tacitly approve of this. Thus, Mark's ties to his daughter and her mother were intact when he was incarcerated. In fact, he notes that it was the emotional tie to his daughter that motivated his criminal behavior in the first place. His prison time severed the tie between himself and his girlfriend, who found a man with a stable, well-paying job, which in turn led to the separation from his daughter.

For those fathers with moderate or strong ties to their children and/or their children's mothers, the threat of prison can act as a powerful deterrent to criminal behavior. Rick, a young Camden father who was still together with his 18-month old son's mother, exclaimed:

I don't see how those guys want to keep going to jail. That's crazy to me. That's what I be tellin' these guys, man. The most I did was three months in jail. ... That's a place I don't want to be, I know that. ... And—I don't see how these guys all just take little times of their life out. You missin' a lot, man. Then they get out, these things have changed. Most of the people I know be doin' two, three, four year [sentences]. Three months, man [was too much for me].

Q: Is it ever a temptation to go back to [selling] drugs?

Yeah, it is, but see, my son. That's really changed me, and my time that I did in jail...that three months.

Kevin's brother Craig has been to prison several times also. He now works day labor rather than selling drugs, because he has a child and does not want to be like his father. "[My father] passed away when I was about 23 or 24. He was in and out of prison. That is basically why I try to do what I do (work day labor rather than sell drugs), because I do not want to be like that when my children [are] growing up. "

Sometimes the threat of prison does not lead fathers who are attached to their children to completely disavow drug sales, but it does slow their rate of offending dramatically. Lee is a 42-year-old African American father of three children by three different mothers. He maintains some contact with all three of his children. He's had any number of jobs since graduating from high school (construction, vending, factory work), but now works primarily through formal-sector day labor agencies. He supplements his day labor income by doing side jobs for friends and neighbors (yard work, moving), and by selling crack.

Lee sold drugs quite regularly before his son, now aged 17, was born.

This was my first [child]. I was nervous. I said, “What am I going to do? Suppose I get locked up for selling drugs. I’m in jail. I can’t provide her [and the child].” ...So I straightened up.

Lee is one of many fathers who say they tried to leave their illegal activities behind when they had children. Like these other men, Lee’s reasons were three-fold: he didn’t want anything to interfere with his ability to support his child financially; he didn’t want prison to come between him and his son relationally, and he wanted his son to think of him as an “upstanding” guy rather than as a criminal.

He sees the oldest child, who lives in Colorado, only once a year, but is on excellent terms with the mother. He corresponds regularly with her, and in that way maintains a line of communication to his son. She tells her son that his father is a “good guy,” which pleases Lee. He sees his middle child only sporadically (about once a month), whenever “people, places, and things” take him to that part of town and the mother allows the visit. The child doesn’t know that he’s her father, and she calls him “Mr. Eddy” rather than “daddy.” He hopes that someday the mother will tell the child she’s his. This child also gets cash or a bond on her birthday, but no other support.

He lives with his third child, and spends most evenings at home with her and her mother. Lee speaks often about the importance of being honest with his kids, and about the importance of providing for them. Both, he feels, are compromised by any criminal activity that might end with incarceration.

What makes a good father is being honest. Being honest and trustworthy in the community and outside the community. Being honest so that people will speak to you. That’s the first part. ...You walk with your kids and people speak to you, they respect you... The second thing is being able to provide for your kids. When you take a walk with them or walk around the neighborhood. They say, ‘Hey daddy, I want an [Italian] ice or a Popsicle.’ You can’t say ‘I can’t do that right now.’ To be able to provide for your kids. [But] the main thing being honest and truthful. Because if you’re a liar and a cheat, nothing happens for you, nothing happens for your children because they’ll tell them the dirt that you did. [They’ll say] “Your father’s a rotten motherfucker.”

Lee has managed to stay pretty clear of the drug trade since his first son was born 17 years ago, but the birth of each subsequent child has reinvigorated his desire to stay away from the trade and its “fast money.” When we asked him what kind of father he wanted to be for his

youngest child, a daughter, he replied, “To be strong. To put a home over her head. And show her that education is the best thing to do. Because fast money will get you nowhere.”

In his late 20s, Lee was arrested twice for possession of marijuana and for shoplifting. Both times, he was released almost immediately, though he’s not sure why. Lee considers himself lucky because he’s never been arrested for selling drugs and, though he continues to deal on and off, these activities are nothing like those he pursued for about five years in his early 20s. Lee claims that currently he sells drugs only occasionally, and then only to “provide” for his family. Two months ago, Lee only sold to three customers. This month, he’s only sold drugs twice.

There are fathers who try but fail to reconnect, either because they cannot locate the child, their child’s mother or guardian isn’t willing to facilitate a reconciliation or because the child itself doesn’t want a relationship with the father. It is also true that the experience of prison does not motivate some fathers to stop offending and reorient their lives. The most “hardened” criminal in our sample was an African American in Philadelphia who calls himself “O.” When he was seven years old, O began stealing the money his mother had set aside to pay his tuition at the local Catholic school. In his teens, he would rob anyone he happened to see if he needed money, and he claims the neighbors even started a petition to get him out of the neighborhood. He also broke into local stores and pawned he stolen goods to other stores nearby. By the time he was 14 he had a crew of seven working along side him robbing stores and fencing the items to other local retailers, and reported making about \$1,000 a week between the eight of them.

The first time he got caught was when he was 12; he’d stolen a police officer’s son’s bike. They lived in the neighborhood, and the father made sure that O was put in juvenile detention. Over the next six years, he was in and out of juvenile institutions for various offenses.

When he was 18 he stopped burgling stores and began pimping the woman who would become the mother of his three kids and reported making a good living off of her. When he was 19, he pulled a knife on three policemen whom he claims were hassling him. They also found a pound of marijuana on him, and served his first sentence as an adult. Although his children’s mother is now dead (she was murdered by a client while he was in prison), O occasionally sees his 16-year-old daughter, who lives with her mother’s mother and now has a child of her own. Regarding his children, O says,

Sometimes I worry about how my children are doing because I'm not in touch with them, and I never really been in touch with them. I see them from time to time, but it really worries me because there is not a bond there.

Despite these worries, O's lifestyle has not changed, and he has no connection at all to his two younger children.

Fatherhood as a Turning Point

It is important to remember that for those fathers with previously severed ties who attempt to use the prison experience to turn their lives around, incarceration provides the necessary "time out" but the fact of their fatherhood provides the motivation. One common theme that emerged from our interviews was the dramatic impact that becoming a father often had on men's lifestyles. The stories fathers told us sometimes had the flavor of religious testimonies and were structured into "before" and "after" accounts. Typically, these fathers had been involved in selling or using drugs, hanging out on the corner, and "messing with" several different women—a lifestyle several respondents referred to as "rippin' and runnin' the streets." However, after their first child was born, many reported a dramatic change in their behavior. Ahmad, a 19-year-old Camden high school graduate who works in the formal sector and regularly spends time with his daughter (though he provides only intermittent financial help), described the impact the birth of his daughter had on his life as follows:

She changed my life a lot. I was headed down the wrong path. I grew up on the streets, everything from drugs to this and that. I mean, I've been in jail before. But ever since she's been born, I slowed down a lot. You know. [] 'Cause it's like, before her, I didn't really care too much about anything. I really just lived every day for that day. But as of now, I'm living every day for today and tomorrow. [] Until she was born, you couldn't tell me nothing, you know. [] I don't know what it is. It's like I've been through a lot. Even after she was born, it's like, I've been in life and death situations. So many times I had a gun stuck to my head. It's like, I'm still here, you know. When I say so many times, I mean ten or fifteen times.

These sentiments were echoed by “Bucket,” a 46-year-old father of one adult daughter and one 12-year-old daughter. Bucket has a GED and does odd jobs (mostly window washing) and sees his youngest daughter twice a month, yet offers no financial support.

I always wanted to be a father. I always wanted a child. I waited until I was 25 years old before I had my first child, but I always wanted to be a father. Before I had her, [I was] in trouble. I was doing wrong things. I was wild, crazy. It always seems as though I was getting in some kind of trouble.

Fathers often enthusiastically embraced the lifestyle changes brought about by their new role, and did not merely accept them with reluctance. Robert, a 23-year-old college drop out (he dropped out to help support his son) sees his six-month-old son frequently and contributes a portion of his earnings from his full-time formal-sector job intermittently. When we asked him how the pregnancy of his girlfriend and birth of his son had affected him, he told us,

Yeah, it has definitely changed my day-to-day life because I know that for the whole nine months my girl was pregnant and to this date, I have been like totally with her, if not physically at least like on the phone, [asking] “How is everything?” I don’t talk to anybody like my friends and how I used to go to parties and things like that. And it is not because I feel like “Oh darn, I can’t go out.” I want to be there. I want to be with my son, you know. I would rather know what is going on with him then be somewhere, because even when I am out, I am like thinking about him. [I have] reoriented [my life].

According to many of these fathers, their child’s birth literally “saved” them from the streets. The salvation theme was fairly strong in virtually all of the interviews with fathers who maintained some level of involvement with their child. Even for those fathers whose involvement had lapsed, many still used this salvation motif to describe how their lives had been transformed by a child’s birth. For some fathers, the first child was a sufficient impetus to leave the streets. For others, the transformation did not occur until a second or third child was born (and the father was older).

In addition to these retrospective accounts of lifestyle changes, the impact of fatherhood was also apparent from the answers fathers gave when we asked them to imagine what their lives would be like if they had never had children. Some men did tell us that things would be easier for them, and that they could have finished school or taken advantage of better employment opportunities. But the overwhelming majority of fathers we interviewed believed strongly (even

passionately) that their situations would be much worse without the presence of children in their lives. The most involved fathers spoke most poignantly to this point, but many less involved fathers (and even some completely uninvolved fathers) said their lives would be mean very little if it were not for the fact that they had fathered a child. The following quotes are representative of many others that we could have selected. Kevin, a 21-year-old father with a GED, does not work regularly but “baby-sits” his toddler each day while the child’s mother works. Kevin contributes financially when he picks up odd jobs on weekends.

I think [my life] would be a lot different to tell you the truth. Yeah, [I would be] getting into trouble. No, I wouldn’t be settled. I’d probably, you know, honestly, I’d probably be in jail or something like that, you know. (Having a kid) calms you down.

Lee, a 42-year-old high school graduate, lives with the mother of his youngest child and contributes to the household expenses as well as to the support of his older two children.

Without the kids I’d probably be a dog. I hope not with AIDS. [] I’m more settled now. [Being a father] has stopped me from doing something real stupid.

Bucket, who we described above, told us,

I’d probably still be doing the things I was doing. ‘Cause when I did have my first child, it changed me. It stopped me from doing all this stuff I was doing before. So maybe I’d still be doing the things I was doing before if I didn’t have her. (*Q: What stuff?*) Oh, you know, I was on the weed, drinking. If I didn’t have [my children], I’d still be doing that. [] Because [of them] I stopped hanging with different people, I stopped going certain places, you know what I mean. And I got an outlook on life that was different.

In particular, some men claimed that their status as fathers was incompatible with selling drugs, an activity that many had engaged in before the birth of their children. Nelson asked Robert a 23 year-old father of a six-month-old son, if he would consider selling drugs again to clear up his financial problems. He replied:

[No], I want to keep it clean, and that is the hardest thing. I could do that and probably make three times over [what I’m making now], and probably get out of all of this [financial mess]. But I don’t think that it would make me a better person because it would make me paranoid, and plus I would be bringing an environment around my child that I just do not want. Beeping at 12:00 at night

and things of that nature—because I used to do that type of thing when I was younger. I experienced it.

Conclusion

The first conclusion we draw from these case studies of low-income, non-custodial fathers is that the same life event, incarceration, can, depending on the father's prior situation and his response, result in several different pathways. For those fathers who have fairly solid ties to family and whose lifestyle prior to prison had not driven a deep wedge, incarceration disrupts the bond fathers have to their romantic partner and to their children. Following Sampson and Laub, we expect that such disruption might well have a negative impact on the prospects of the father's rehabilitation and may reinforce his criminal trajectory rather than reverse it. A second conclusion we draw is that for fathers whose lifestyle prior to incarceration had already driven that wedge, incarceration offers the opportunity to rebuild severed social ties by curbing the destructive behavior that separated them from their children and children's mothers in the first place. For these men, the potential of reconnecting with their children may offer a powerful motivation to go straight that is not present for non-fathers. Third, we also shown that fear of incarceration, when combined with the event of becoming a father, can act as a powerful deterrent to criminal activity, and may reverse a father's career trajectory. For those who reported engagement in offending behavior prior to having a child but who were not incarcerated, criminal behavior suddenly becomes far more "costly" and fraught with risk. Fatherhood, on the other-hand, offers powerful perceived rewards if men can manage to avoid those things (incarceration, addiction, debilitation) that might disrupt the father-child bond.

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